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A better way to deal with Nicaragua

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WASHINGTON - Congress and the president are about to lock horns again on one of the most divisive foreign policy issues of this decade: Should the United States continue trying to overthrow the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua? This fight should be avoided.

The administration is determined to continue its belligerent policy of military pressure and confrontation. It first tried to do this by financing contra rebels in a covert war against the Sandinistas. Congress rejected this discredited strategy after two years of raucous debates and a torrent of leaks about what was supposed to be a secret war.

After limping along this past year with a compromise humanitarian-aid program for the contras - a disguised welfare program to keep them alive and trigger-happy until a fresh attempt could be made to get real weapons - the president has come forward with a new request.

Even as Congress is swallowing drastic domestic cuts to reduce the staggering federal deficit, the president asks us to approve \$100 million in new aid to the rebels: \$30 million will be in the form of "humanitarian" items such as boots, tents, trucks and aircraft; the remaining \$70 million will be for arms. The president wants full authority to funnel that lethal equipment to the contras, which, without a doubt, means reinjecting the CIA into the Nicaraguan insurgency.

The president can get enough votes in the Senate to drag his request reluc-

tantly along, even though real support for his policy of military pressure on the Nicaraguan government has dwindled sharply over the last two years.

There is a painful recognition, even among the president's closest supporters in the Senate, that his strategy for dealing with the Sandinistas is a failure. Forcing just enough votes for passage doesn't demonstrate national unity for this policy - let alone encourage other countries' support.

After five years, the hole we are in gets deeper every day. The Contadora process - a genuine attempt by our allies in the region to negotiate a political settlement to the dispute - is floundering. The foreign ministers of the Contadora countries and the Contadora support-group nations publicly call on the president to cease support of contra insurgency.

Confrontation has not made the Sandinistas more tractable or more interested in a lessening of tensions in Central America. On the contrary, Sandinista radicals, using US pressure as a justification, have strengthened their grip. Massive quantities of Soviet, Cuban and other Soviet-bloc arms are flowing into Nicaragua to bolster their military forces.

The president's policy isn't working. Administration rhetoric aside, there are other constructive alternatives that could form a new, more positive approach:

- US support for the contra insurgency should cease. Having created the contras, the United States cannot now make them disappear. We can't back away and leave them in Honduras and Costa Rica, disgruntled, desperate and

heavily armed. We would have to continue to feed and maintain them while assisting their relocation and resettlement.

- The United States must become serious about supporting the Contadora negotiations and about engaging in bilateral talks with the Sandinistas. A mixture of economic, diplomatic and political pressure and incentives would provide the leverage the administration argues it must have in seeking a settlement.

- Congress and the president should reach an understanding on the level of Soviet and Cuban influence in Central America that will be tolerated. The United States should not allow any Cuban or Soviet military bases or combat presence in Nicaragua. The introduction of offensive weapons from the Soviet Union or Cuba into Nicaragua should not be accepted. We must make clear that the United States would assist our Central American friends and allies in resisting any Sandinista attack on them.

Defining these elements and putting them into a coherent policy should occur in a national debate involving the president, both houses of Congress and the American people.

President Reagan and the hard-liners have been given five years to try to frighten the Sandinistas into concessions by supporting the contra insurgency. It hasn't worked - and won't work, no matter how much money and how many lives are expended. It is time for a change.

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